

## **The effects of routine veterinary appointments on rabbit welfare**

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# The effect of routine veterinary care on rabbit welfare

D. Parr\* and S. Holt

## Introduction

The needs of pet rabbits are very complex and can therefore be misunderstood by owners (Prebble and Meredith, 2014). The PDSA PAWS report (2018), states that the rabbit is Britain's third most popular pet, yet at least 340,000 are not registered with a veterinary practice. Non-registration could indicate a lack of owner knowledge surrounding the need for rabbit healthcare. This lack of healthcare and knowledge may be having a negative effect on these rabbits. The lifespan of a rabbit can be up to 13 years of age, but due to aspects such as diet, poor health and little exercise, the pet does not always live to this age (Buseth and Saunders, 2015). The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact on the rabbits welfare of not attending routine appointments.

## Research objectives

- \* To understand the effects of routine veterinary appointments on rabbit welfare
- \* To obtain a mean age for euthanised rabbits in 2018..

## Methodology

A retrospective study was performed in a single first opinion practice in Gloucestershire. The clinical notes for 111 rabbits seen during October and November 2018 were analysed and then split into groupings according to their attendance at non-routine appointments (n=40). Group one had not attended any routine appointments within the eighteen months of presenting for a non-routine appointment (n=15). Group two had attended routine appointments within the last eighteen months prior to presenting for a non-routine appointment (n=25). An American Society of Anaesthesiology (ASA) grade (Figure 1) was given to all rabbits at each appointment. The rabbits' first non-routine appointment grade was recorded. A Mann-Whitney U test was performed to see if there was a significant difference between the grades of both groups and to compare the age and sex of the two groups. All rabbit records presented for euthanasia throughout the whole of 2018 were also analysed for age at time of death.

Category	Physical Status
ASA 1	Normal healthy patient
ASA 2	Patient with mild systemic disease
ASA 3	Patient with severe systemic disease that is not a constant threat to life
ASA 4	Patient with severe systemic disease that is a constant threat to life
ASA 5	Moribund patient not expected to survive with or without surgery

Figure 1: ASA grading system

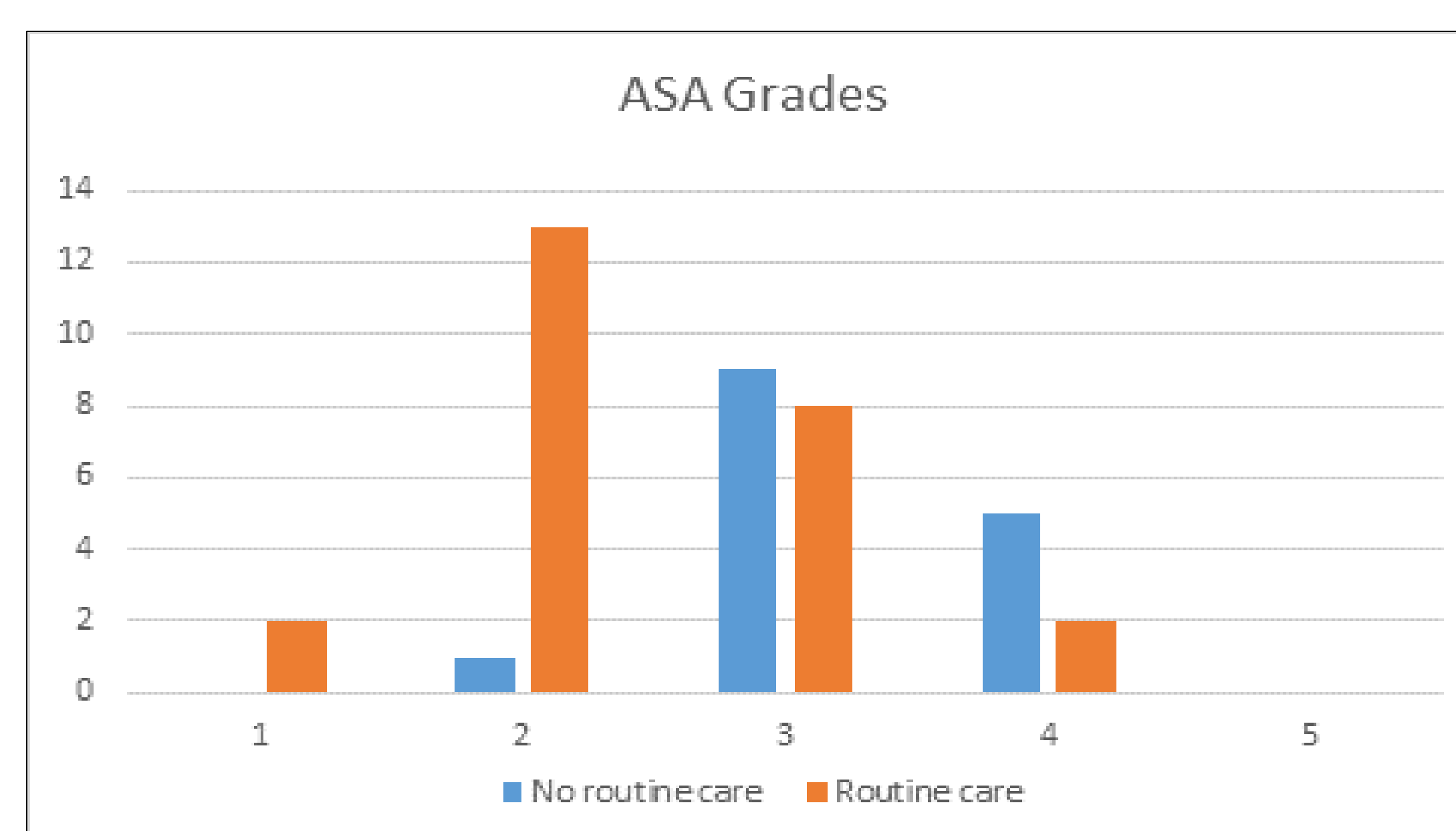
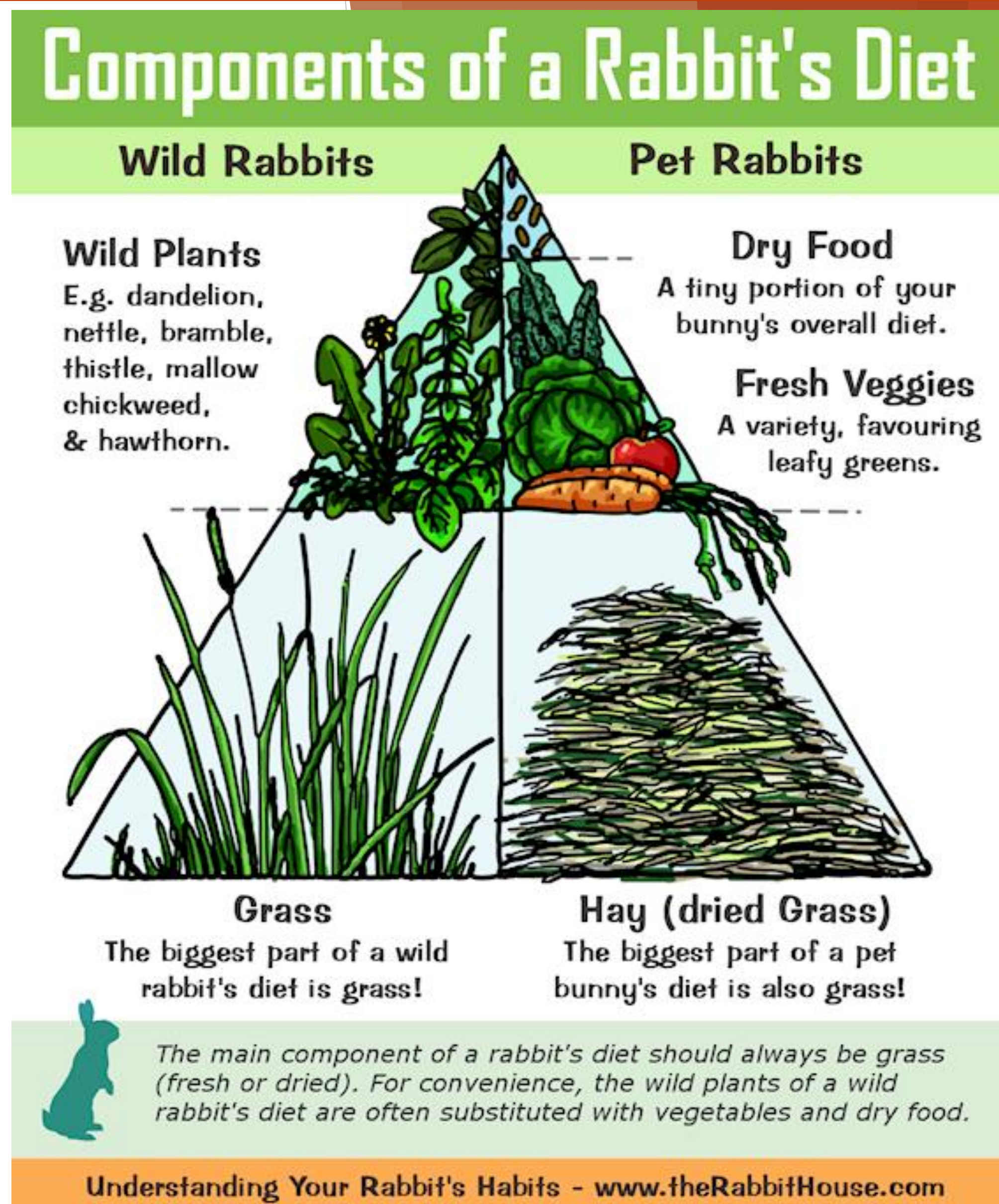


Figure 2: ASA grades for the rabbits in groups one and two



Components of a rabbit's diet (The Rabbit House, 2018).

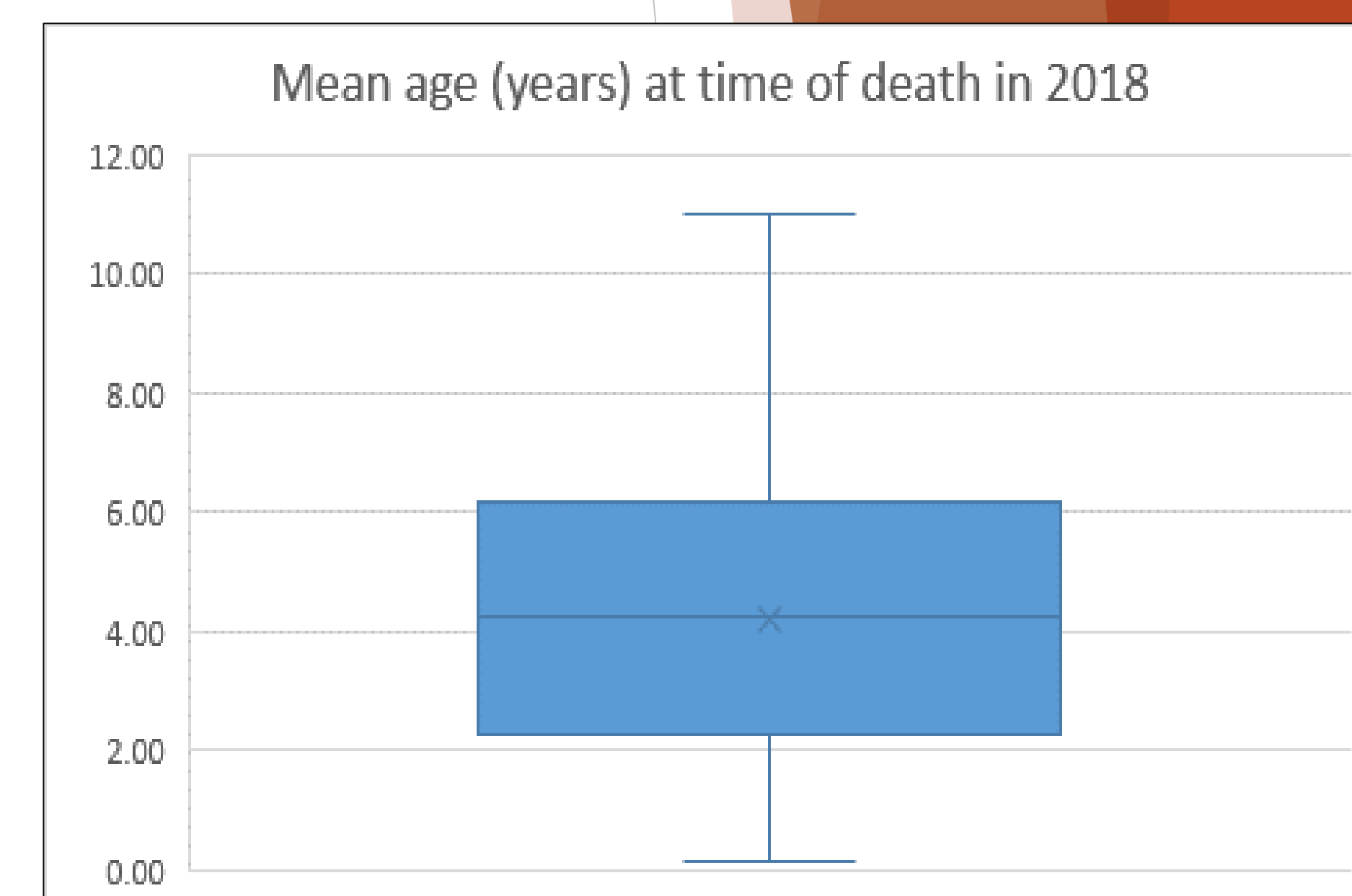


Figure 3: The mean age (years), at time of death in 2018

## Results

The rabbits in Group one had significantly higher ( $p=0.001$ ) ASA grades than those in Group two, (Figure 2). This meant that the rabbits that were seen within the last eighteen months for routine care, had a significantly lower ASA grade than those who had not received routine care. The median ASA grade for Group one was 3. In Group one only 6.66% (n=1) were graded lower than 3 and 33.33% (n=5) graded at a 4. The median ASA grade for Group two was 2, with 60% (n=15) graded lower than 3 and 8% (n=2) graded at 4. There was no significant difference between the age and sex of the groups ( $p>0.05$ ). A total of 38 rabbits were euthanised in 2018. Of these, 42.1% (n=16) were less than 3 years old, (Figure 3) and 65.8% (n=25) had never attended a routine appointment prior to ethanasia.

## Conclusions

Attendance at routine veterinary appointments can improve rabbit welfare and reduce the severity of their condition when presenting for non-routine appointments. Non-attendance for routine veterinary care can dramatically shorten the lifespan of rabbits.



Rabbits in a suitable environment.

**Reference list;** American Society of Anaesthesiologists (ASA). (2014). *ASA physical classification system*. [Online], Available from: <https://studylib.net/doc/8763741/asa-physical-status-classification-system> [Accessed 5 March 2019]. Buseth, M. and Saunders, R. (2015). *Rabbit Behaviour, Health and care*. Oxfordshire: Cabi., People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA). (2018). *PAWreport2018*. [Online], Available from: <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/media/4371/paw-2018-full-web-ready.pdf> [Accessed on 04 October 2018]., Prebble, J., and Meredith, A. (2014). Food and water intake and selective feeding in rabbits on four feeding regimes, *Journal of Animal Physiology and Animal Nutrition* [online] 98(5), pp. 991-1,000. . The rabbit house. (2018). *Components of a rabbit's diet*. [Online], Available from: <http://www.therabbithouse.com/diet/components-rabbit-diet.asp> [Accessed 17th August 2019].